I. DEVELOPMENT OF THE MYSTERY RELIGIONS

A. Introduction

1. The development of agriculture had a profound and far reaching effect upon the spiritual development of humanity.

a. No longer content to worship the Goddess of the Wild Things and the Lord of the Hunt, early mankind sought to interpret their deities in the physical surroundings of the places where they settled to grow their crops.

(1) Volcanic mountains, such as those surrounding ancient Persia, gave rise to Fire Gods whose priests evolved a cosmology which postulated a universe based upon a struggle between good and evil.

(a) A Fire Priest named Zoroaster would eventually lay the foundation for Zoroasterianism, which would lead to Mithraicism, which would greatly influence religious thinking of the early Christian church.

(b) Even today, the spiritual center of the Japanese people is the volcanic mountain Fujiyama.

(c) And the major deity of the Hawaiian people is the volcano Goddess Pele.

(2) Natural opening into the earth were seen as gateways into the domain of the deities and shrines were built around them.

(a) The most famous of these openings was the shrine at Delphi where, through a succession of goddesses and gods who served as patrons, the priestesses received visions of the future for a fee paid to the temple.

(b) There is some conjecture that the visions were brought about by inhaling the gases rising from the chasm, over which the priestesses were suspended on a tripod seat.

(3) In the British Isles, prominent hills or Tors, such as Glastonbury Tor in Somerset, and the Welsh mountains in Snowdonia, became the focus for local rites.

(a) In Ireland, each river was believed to have its own Goddess, was well as the Goddesses which hold sway on dry land.

b. The one common thread running through all of this was that while the people were becoming urbanized, they still felt a need to identify with the countryside around them and religious rites evolved around some natural power spot so that anyone wishing to partake of the religious experience of these rites had to make a pilgrimage to that religious shrine and be initiated into those rites by the local priestesses or priests.

c. As the cities grew up it became necessary to spread out into the countryside and the shrines were sometimes enclosed in temple building and sometimes opened 'branch offices' on the other side of the city, or in neighboring cities, for the people who could not or would not make the pilgrimages.

(1) This led to the establishment of temples, for public worship and offering, in all the cities of the ancient world.

(a) Usually, these temples were dedicated to the local Goddess or God, that the people of the city worshipped as their personal deity.

[1] An example would be Athens, which was named for its patroness Pallas Athena, who is the Greek Goddess of Wisdom and Beauty.

(b) Not surprisingly, these deities were sometimes tribal deities, which were urbanized as the city grew in size.

[1] And the rites that grew up around the temple were seasonal rites performed to insure the common well-being of the city as a whole.

[a] Religious rites for personal spiritual development was a foreign concept to all but a very few members of the priest/esshood who were responsible for seeing after the well being of their followers.

2. Once the concept of ownership of land for growing food gained a foothold, the need to defend the land from 'outsiders' became a primary concern.

a. This led to the development of standing armies and navies whose purpose, while initially defensive, soon became offensive.

(1) Time and again, the justification for attacking their neighbors was wrapped in religious robes and it became a matter of one city's Goddess/God supplanting the other in the conquered city.

(a) Usually this did not create too much of an upheaval for the common citizen because the attacker was usually a nearby neighbor and through long years of trade with each other, they were familiar with one anothers rites and beliefs.

(b) Most people saw it as a problem only for the priesthoods, who lost control of the temple monies to the conquering priesthood.

[1] Sometimes it was seen as an improvement for the city could only benefit from having a more powerful God/dess ruling over it and as long as the priesthood kept up the seasonal rituals to insure prosperity the common citizen was not too worried about who was ruling

the city.

3. The founding of the Mystery Religions can be tentatively dated back to 331 BCE, when Alexander of Macedonia completed his conquest of the world around the Mediterranean and the Near East.

a. To give some perspective on how this brought about such a drastic change in the world order we need to look at astronomy and see if we can discern a pattern that repeats itself.

(1) Ancient humanity used astronomy and astrology to guide their lives.

(a) The zodiac was seen as a measurement system which allowed humankind to divide the solar year up into 12 equal parts, although some believe that the original zodiac had only 10 signs.

(b) The sign of Virgo-Scorpio was broken into two parts by inserting Libra (the Balance) in between them. This created eleven signs plus Libra, establishing the 'balance' at the point of equilibrium between the ascending northern and descending southern signs.

(c) Each year the sun passes entirely around the zodiac and return to the point from which it started, the vernal equinox, and each year it falls just a little short of making the complete circle of the heavens in the allotted space of time.

[1] As a result, it crosses the equator just a little behind the spot in the zodiacal sign where it crosses the previous year.

[a] Each sign of the zodiac consists of 30 degrees, and as the sun loses about one degree every 72 years, it regresses through one entire constellation or sign in approximately 2,160 years, and through the entire zodiac in about 25,920 years.

(2) Among the ancients, the sun was always symbolized by the figure and nature of the constellation through which it passed at the vernal equinox.

(a) For nearly the past 2,000 years the sun has crossed the equator at the vernal equinox in the constellation of Pisces (the two fishes).

[1] Christianity developed about the beginning of the Piscean Age and the fish was an early symbol for them.

[a] Christianity was only one of two new religions that were based, in part, on the teachings of Judaism.

[2] About 630 years after the founding of Christianity, Mohammed founded the religion of Islam, and his followers are known as Muslims or Moslems.

(b) For the 2,160 years prior to then, it had crossed through the constellation of Aries (the ram).

[1] Just as the Age of Aries began, a new religion developed which would prove to be one of the most enduring Monotheistic religions on Earth.

[a] Judaism was founded by Abraham of Chaldea, who made an agreement with Jehovah that he and his offspring would spread the doctrine that there was only one God.

[b] In return Jehovah promised Abraham the land of Canaan (Israel) for his descendants. The only problem is that the Jews and the Arabs both trace their beginnings back to sons of Abraham, and now both claim Israel as offspring of Abraham.

[2] About 600 years later Hinduism developed in India.

[a] From 600-300 years before the Age of Aries gave way to the Age of Pisces, Buddhism, Taoism, Confuscianism, Zoroastrianism and Mithraicism developed.

(c) Prior to the Age of Aries, the vernal equinox was is the sign of Taurus (the bull).

[1] In ancient Egypt, it was during this period that the Bull, Apis, was sacred to the Sun God.

[a] And the Winged Bull was the spiritual symbol of the Assyrians back when they had city-states dedicated to Goddesses.

[b] How interesting - that just as humanity was discovering agriculture during the Age of Taurus, the bull was domesticated so that it could pull a plow.

(d) We are about to enter a new age. The Age of Aquarius which promises to turn the world upside down.

b. Getting back to gaining a perspective on how Alexander the Great changed the world order, we need to understand that there is a pattern where the world order changes about every 2,000 years - militarily, economically and religiously.

(1) At any given time through history one or two of these conditions may change, but it is rare that all three change around the same time. When they do people live in what the chinese philosophers called 'interesting times'.

c. The 400 years preceding the Age of Pisces can be compared with the same period of our time, which is bringing in the Age of Aquarius.

(1) About 331 BCE an upstart military leader named Alexander

of Macedonia led an army into the very depth of what was then known as the Persian Empire after defeating the troops of Persia who were trying to maintain control of Greek cities in Asia Minor.

(a) Once he had effectively wrested control of the empire from the Persians, he proceeded to take the best of what the empire and his native land had to offer and he created a new world order by which he and his generals divided up the known world and planned to rule.

(b) After Alexander's death the generals ruled as best they could, but they slowly lost control of the great empire until a new military power, Rome, came along and took over.

[1] It is important to keep in mind that the Roman empire did not spring up over night. Under the inspiration and protection of the Macedonian Empire from foreign intervention the Romans were able to defeat the Etruscans who had ruled most of Italy until that time.

[a] It was the peace brought about by the Grecian empire that allowed the Roman republic to last for 200 years and embrace many of the loftier ideals of Greek culture.

(2) In the mid 1700's, a colonel in a rag tag band of irregulars attached to regular troops of the British Empire, started to make a name for himself among the colonists of a British possession.

(a) The British, who were the ruling elite just under 300 years ago, thought of the colonial colonel as an uneducated barbarian and did not take him seriously when the colonials declared their independence and named as their supreme military leader the barbarian from Virginia.

(b) History has recorded how George Washington had his day in the sun when, after defeating the mercenary troops of Britain at Valley Forge, General Cornwallis surrendered to him at Yorktown.

[1] Again the world was turned up side down, and the empire of old was supplanted by a new order, only on a smaller scale.

[a] While it is true that the British Empire did not collapse with the loss of the American Revolutionary War, it marked the beginning of the breaking up of the Empire.

[b] And despite recurring clashes, like the War of 1812, the new country was allowed to grow and develop as a Republic for 200 years until now it is very common to refer to America as the new Rome.

(3) Like Alexander before him, Washington and his supporters took the best of what they liked in Britain and combined it with the best thoughts and ideas of the Colonies.

(a) Washington refused to be made the king of America, and they hammered out a new form of government, new laws of commerce, and assurances that the old religious order would not hold sway in the new country.

[1] Not long after the American Revolution, the French Revolution, based on American ideals, rocked Europe with its deliberate shaking off of aristocratic rule.

[a] Even the Russian Revolution was originally a revolt of the people against their aristocracy. It was only after the revolution left a vacuum of leadership that the Communists stepped in and assumed power.

d. If you look around at our capitol, you will see that the architecture is reminiscent of Grecian and Roman Temples, and the principles that our country was founded upon, principles like freedom and democracy, are Grecian Ideals.

(1) This is not a coincidence. The Founding Fathers were scholars of Greece and Rome, for knowledge of the history of these two countries was considered an integral part of a classical education.

(a) It will be interesting to see if America, like Rome, falls into the trap of being forced into becoming an Imperial power in order to support the welfare state at home.

[1] One of my favorite sayings is "A people who refuse to learn from history, are doomed to repeat it."

B. The Social Significance of the Mystery Religions

1. In order to understand the needs and desires which found satisfaction in mystery religions, it is necessary to take a broad view of the general social situation in the Greco-Roman world.

a. And to define, if possible, the outstanding religious interests of the Mediterranean people in the 1st century of the Piscean Age.

(1) Greco-Roman society with all of its complexity was, even so, a closely knit social fabric unified in large and significant ways.

(a) Politically, the Mediterranean world of the Augustan Age was a unit for the 1st time in history, welded together by 300 years of military conquests preceding the beginning of our era.

[1] To hold this Mediterranean world together in an imperial unity, Rome had thrown over it a great network of military highways reaching to the farthest provinces and centering on Rome herself.

(b) Cultural and commercial processes operated even more

effectively than military conquests and political organization to unify the peoples of the Mediterranean area.

[1] Society under the early Empire continued to be as highly Hellenized as it had been during the 300 years previous.

[a] Greek continued to be the language of culture and commerce, with Latin as the lingua Franca of diplomacy.

[2] The sea, cleared of pirates, was a great channel of commerce that led to all the Roman world, and the military highways provided the necessary land routes.

[a] Because of the easy means of communication, there was a free mingling of races and classes in the centers of population.

(c) Free competition on a world scale gave the individuals their opportunities.

[1] Before the days of Alexander, the interests of the individual were quite submerged in comparison with those of the tribe or state.

[a] The larger social group was the end-all of existence and personal concerns were properly subordinated thereto.

[b] But in the changed conditions of the imperial period, all was different.

[2] Individual interests came to the fore and those of the state receded to the background.

[a] The Roman Empire meant far less to the citizen than the Greek polis had meant.

[b] Rome was too large and too far away to be very dependent on each citizens support or to contribute to their happiness.

(d) In the ruthlessness of conquest and the stress of competition, local customs were ignored, traditions were swept aside, and the unsupported individuals were thrown back upon their own resources.

[1] Happiness and well-being, if won at all, must be won by the individual, and for the individual alone.

2. Religion, like the other phases of Greco-Roman life, felt the effect of these changed social conditions.

a. For the masses, the former religious sanctions and guaranties no longer functioned.

(1) In the old, pre-imerial days, the individual was well satisfied with group guaranties that were offered by local and nationalistic religions.

(a) Granted, the relationship to the state deity was only an indirect one - through the group to which they belonged.

(b) Also granted, the goods sought were chiefly social benefits, which were shared with their fellow citizens.

[1] But so long as the God/desses protected the state and the state protected the citizen, they were well content.

(2) Successive conquests by foreign powers, however, rudely destroyed this complacency, and the victory of Macedonian and Roman arms wrecked the prestige of merely local and national deities.

(a) As racial barriers were broken down and the individuals felt free to travel and trade, they became conscious of needs and desires they had never known before.

3. As a practical matter, the time honored customs of an individuals parent and grandparent could not be maintained in foreign lands. New sanctions and assurances of a more personal sort were needed.

a. In line with the general social movements of the times, there was a distinct breakdown of traditional religion, and national cults, popular in the Hellenic period, fell into disuse.

(1) But the masses of people did not become irreligious by any means, they instead turned to religions of another type and sought satisfactions of a different variety.

(a) Their quest was no longer for a god/dess powerful enough to save the state but rather for one who was benevolent enough to save the individual.

[1] Oracles were consulted, not so often in the interest of the community but more frequently for the guidance of individuals in their personal affairs.

[a] More than ever before the home became a temple and the daily life of the family was filled with the trappings of piety.

[b] The shrines of the healing gods/esses were overcrowded, and magicians, who were considered the chief mediators of divine power, carried on a thriving business.

4. In particular, people turned for the satisfaction of personal desires to the group of mystery religions, which were very ancient cults that had hitherto been comparatively insignificant.

a. Most of them came to the Greco-Roman world from the Orient, with the authority of a venerable past, with an air of deep mystery, and with rites that were most impressive.

b. But the chief reason for their popularity at this time was the satisfactory way in which they ministered to the needs of the individual.

(1) Completely denationalized and liberated from racial prejudices, they could be practiced anywhere within or without the empire.

(a) They no longer depended upon a natural focus such as a cave or spring or mountain, so it was possible to worship anywhere they found themselves.

[1] This allowed popular cults like that of Isis to spread thoughout the Roman empire with little or no resistance

(b) Being genuinely democratic brotherhoods in which rich and poor, slave and master, Greek and barbarian met on a parity, they welcomed men of all races to their membership.

C. What the Mystery Religions had to offer Humanity

1. A new birth for the individual

a. When the neophyte was initiated into the cult he became a new man.

(1) In earlier centuries, when the emphasis in religion was tribal or national, this had no special advantage.

(a) Then the individual felt certain of his salvation because of his birth into a particular tribe or race. This still holds true for tribal religions like Judaism, where it is not enough to be a good Jew. All Jews must be good because they are the chosen people and their God will not make good on His promises until the whole tribe meets his requirements.

(2) Men in the Roman world had confidence in neither racial connections nor in the potentiality of human nature.

(a) The first century Roman wanted a salvation that included the immortality of the soul as well as the present welfare of the body.

(b) An essential change of being was felt to be necessary, and the mystery religions guaranteed this by means of the initiatory rites.

b. The mystery initiation met the basic religious need for

individual as opposed to racial guarantees.

(1) Mystical experience was a common denominator of all the Greco-Oriental cults of the mystery type.

(a) The imperial age was a time when religion was turning inward and becoming more emotional, while philosophy, converted to religion, was following the same trend.

[1] There was a cultivated antagonism between spirit and matter and a conscious endeavor to detach one from the other by means of ascetic practices.

[a] It was a period of world-weariness and other worldliness.

[2] There was a demand for fresh emotional experiences, and the culminating effort was to overleap the bounds of nature and to attain union with the divine in the region of the occult.

[a] These experiences found expression in the popular religions of redemption, in the mysteries of Eleusis and Attis and Isis and the rest.

2. Fulfilling the yearning for the mystical type of religious experience.

a. Two considerations that have a direct bearing on why the yearning for mystical religious experience arose at this time are:

(1) The thought world of the average person had suddenly enlarged to proportions that were frightening. The horizon of a Syrian trader in Nero's time was vastly more inclusive than that of a few hundred years before. And this new horizon included a far greater number of facts to be classified and accounted for, and a constantly enlarging group of problems and difficulties to be settled. This expanded thought-world of the middle of the 1st century was in a very chaotic state. The social structure of an earlier age had been completely wrecked. Greek democracy and Oriental despotism alike had been crushed by imperial power. National and racial distinctions, once considered very important, had been all but forgotten. Whole classes in society had been wiped out. Old things had passed away and what chiefly impressed the ordinary man about the new order of things imposed by Rome, was not so much its orderliness as its newness. The citizen of the Greek Polis had lived in a friendly town that was his own; but the Roman citizen found himself bewildered in the crowded streets of a strange city that was everyman's world.

(2) The man of the early empire felt that the ultimate control of his disordered universe was not at all in his own hands, but that it rested with supernatural powers on the outside. According to the 1st century point of view, the more important relationships of life were with the controlling powers in the supernatural realm. Whether these powers were friendly or unfriendly or both or neither according

to circumstances, there was a great variety of opinion; but generally speaking there was no doubt of their power.

(c) One way the common man had of establishing safe relations with the occult powers was the way of mysticism. He either projected himself emotionally into the supernatural realm and so came into contact with deity, or else by magic and sacrament drew the God down into the human sphere and in this fashion realized the desired alliance. Not until this 'unio mystica' was accomplished did many men feel completely secure in the face of the uncertainties of life. The mystery religions offered this form of salvation through union with the lord of the cult. This alliance with the lord of the cult robbed the unknown spiritual world of its terrors and gave the initiate the assurance of special privilege in relation to the potent beings who controlled the destinies of men. In the background of each of the mysteries hovered the vague form of the supreme power itself. The Anatolian Magna Mater Deum. Or the Ahura Mazda of the Persians. In the foreground, ready for action, stood the mediator who chiefly mad the divine power manifest in life and nature. The youthful Attis, or the invincible Mithra. The mystery Gods and Goddesses were also potent as netherworld divinities. Persephone reigned as queen of the dead and Osiris presided as judge of the souls of the departed. By means of initiation into their cults, the devotee was enabled to share vividly in the experiences of these divinities and even to attain realistic union with them.

(d) United with the Gods themselves, the initiate was in touch with currents of supernatural power which not only operated to transform his very being but rendered him immune from evil both in this life and in the next.

3. Providing emotional stimulation through the mystical experience of contact with a sympathetic savior.

a. The mysticism of the cults was not of the intellec- tualized type but rather of a more realistic, objective, ecstatic and highly emotional variety.

(1) This emotional character of cult mysticism answered directly to an inordinate appetite for emotional stimulation among the masses.

(a) This abnormal craving, directly or indirectly, was due to the terribly depressing experiences through which society had passed during the wars that filled the years immediately preceding the Piscean Age.

[1] For 400 years the wars had been unceasing. The Mediterranean world had known war at its worst, and this long series of conquests, civil wars, proscriptions, and insurrections had produced an untold amount of agony.

[2] All these military operations had entailed terrible suffering for all classes. There was, of course, the killing and

maiming of the combatants themselves. Bread- winners had been drafted into service, leaving their families to fend for themselves. Crops over large areas had been destroyed to prevent the enemy from living off the land when the armies retreated. Leaving the local farmers as well as the invading army to starve. Conquered lands had been plunged into debt and bankruptcy, while thousands of men, women, and children, formerly free, had been sold as slaves.

[3] The indirect consequences of these military operations were quite as disastrous for the happiness of large numbers of people as were the direct results. One of the most deplorable effects was the practical destruction of the middle classes, which had been the backbone of the society. This left a bad social cleavage between the wealthy aristocratic class on the one hand, and the masses, including the slaves, on the other. Conditions were such that the upper classes had the opportunity of becoming more wealthy and prosperous, while the proletariat correspondingly became more destitute and wretched. Enormous sums of gold and silver, the accumulated wealth of the east, was disgorged on the empire. This created a demand for more luxuries, raised the standard of living for the rich, and multiplied the miseries of the poor. Throughout the period, the number of slaves was constantly being augmented. This lowered the wages and drove free laborers to the idleness of cities where they were altogether too willing to be enrolled on what we would call welfare. The first lesson new Emperors learned, if they were to keep their crowns, was to feed and entertain this huge number of idle workers so that they would not decide to overthrow the government. This is where the phrase "give them bread and circuses" came from.

[4] With such an unequal distribution of the goods of life, it was inevitable that both extremes in Roman society should feel the need of special emotional uplift and stimulation. The aristocrat felt the need of it because he had pleasures too many. There was a disgust with life, bred of self-indulgence and brought to birth by satiety. It was the weariness that comes when amusements cloy and the means of diversion seem exhausted. And the poor freeman because he had pleasures too few. There was a genuine sensitiveness to suffering in this age born of a sympathetic understanding of its pain and an earnest attempt to provide alleviation. It was a period when all classes were sensitive to emotional needs, but chiefly the inarticulate masses who were most miserable and knew not how to express their misery.

b. Generally speaking, the officials of the state religion remained unresponsive to this need and the marble Gods of Greece and Rome had no word for men in agony.

(1) Judaism, which had itself gone through a prolonged martyrdom, should have learned from suffering to minister to personal need, but it had not, for its hope was still a national one, not personal.

c. The religions of redemption that came from the east furnished exactly the emotional satisfaction that the age demanded.

(1) They told men of savior-gods that were very human, who had come to earth and toiled and suffered with men, experiencing to an intensified degree the sufferings to which flesh is heir.

(a) These savior-gods had known the agony of parting from loved ones, of persecution, of mutilation, of death itself. In this hard way they had won salvation for their devotees and now they stood ready to help all men who had need.

(2) The rites of these mystery religions were impressively arranged to represent the sufferings and triumphs of the savior-gods.

(a) In this way it was possible for the initiate to feel as his God had felt, and sometimes more realistically, to repeat the archetypal experiences of his lord. His initiation was a time of great uplift, that elevated him above commonplace worries and gave him an exalted sense of security. In after days the memory of that great event remained with him to bouy him up amid the hardships of his daily lot, or in such special crises as might come to him.

4. By means of initiatory rites of great impressiveness, the mystery cults were able to satisfy the desire for realistic guarantees in religion.

a. The majority of people were not satisfied with a merely emotional assurance that the desired mystical union had taken place.

(1) Something more tangible and objective was required to supplement the evidence furnished by subjective experience.

(a) Both the Greek and Romans conceived of their Gods as being very real and humanistic.

(b) They gave them admirable representation in painting and sculpture and sought to secure their favor by rites that were correspondingly realistic.

[1] At the beginning of the imperial period, when the uncertainties of life made man feel more dependent than ever on supernatural assistance, the operations whereby they strove to assure themselves of the desired aid became, if anything, more realistic than ever. In such an age and amid people who thought in these vivid terms, the rites of religion, in order to satisfy, had to give actual and dramatic representation of the processes they were intended to typify and induce. This was what the ceremonies of the mystery cults did, and this was another reason for the great attractive power of the cults.

b. Most of the rites of the mystery religions had come down in traditional forms from an immemorial antiquity.

(1) Originally performed among primitive people in order to assure the revival of vegetable life in springtime, they were enacted in these later imperial days for the higher purpose of assuring the

rebirth of the human spirit.

(a) Yet, among the masses at least, the efficacy of these ceremonials was as little questioned as it had been in their original primitive settings.

(2) The baptismal rite, in particular, whether by water or blood, was regarded as marking the crucial moment in a genuinely regenerative process.

(a) Once reborn the initiates were treated as such, their birthday was celebrated and they were nourished in a manner appropriate for infants.

(b) Childish though those rites may seem, yet they were frought with spiritual significance for the initiate.

(3) The semblance of mystic marriage and the partaking of consecrated foods were other realistic sacraments in which the neophyte found assurance that he was really and vitally united with his lord and endowed with the divine spirit.

(a) What usually gives the modern student pause is the very sincere conviction of pagan initiates that their spiritual transformation was not only symbolic, but was also really accomplished by these dramatic ceremonies.

5. The personal transformation which was the initial feature of cult mysticism had its ethical as well as its religious aspect, thus producing a blend of ethics and religion.

a. The early imperial period was a time of great moral disorder and confusion, paralleling the stress and strain in other areas of life.

b. The continuous social upheavals of the Hellenistic and republican times, the free mingling of populations in commerce and conquest, and the enormous increase of slaves furthered the process of cutting thousands of human beings loose from moral restraints.

c. However, the general trend in society as a whole was not only a period of moral anarchy but of ethical awakening as well.

(1) Interest was alive on moral questions.

(a) Almost every characteristic vice in Roman society was being met with the most vigorous protests and sometimes by active measures to correct them.

(2) There was at this time a particular demand for a greater correctness in ethical teaching.

(a) Teachers of the time studied the writings of philosophers and moralists to find texts and maxims to use with their

pupils.

(b) Catalogues were made of virtues and vices and the former were summarized as certain cardinal qualities especially to be desired.

(c) There was a call for living examples, which could be referred to as demonstrations of the practicality of these ideals.

(3) The conditions of life were such that most men did not have confidence in their own unaided ability to achieve character.

(a) They looked to the supernatural realm for the powers that controlled personal conduct as well as the more ultimate destinies of humanity.

[1] What the men of the 1st century wanted was not so much ideals, but the power to realize those ideals; not a code of morals, but supernatural sanctions for morality. In the last analysis, it was divine will, and not human welfare, that was the generally accepted criterion whereby the validity of any ethical system was tested. Accordingly, the religion which could furnish supernatural guarantees along with its ethical ideals had a preferred claim to 1st century loyalty.

(b) The stern morality of Judaism was very attractive. The element that fascinated was not the inherent excellence of Jewish rules for living, but the fact that there were venerable sanctions bearing the impress of divine authority.

[1] The Law of the Jews was quoted as the ipse dixit of Yahweh himself and the scriptures were referred to as authentic documents proving the genuineness of the representation. Such confirmation was impressive to men who were seeking for divine authority to make moral conduct obligatory.

(c) The religion of the Egyptian Hermes was one that offered supernatural guarantees for its ethical ideals.

[1] In the process of Hermetic rebirth, the powers of the God drove out hordes of vices and left the regenerated individual divinely empowered for right living.

(d) That was Mithraism's point of strength also, and accounted not a little for the vogue it continued to enjoy for some time after the beginning of the Christian Era.

[1] The "commandments" of Mithraism were believed to be divinely accredited. The Magi claimed that Mithra himself revealed them to their order.

[2] One of the chief reasons why the high Mithraic ideals of purity, truth, and righteousness had real attraction, was because Mithra himself was the unconquerable champion of these ideals and the

ready helper of men who were willing to join with him in the eternal fight of right against wrong and good against evil. Mithraism was the outstanding example of a mystery religion which gave supernatural sanctions to the demands of plain morality.

d. The mysticism of the mysteries came in effectively at just this point to give both realistic content and divine authorization to the ethic of brotherhood.

(1) The ideals of the group found personification and embodiment in the divine Lord or Lady who was the object of the cult worship.

(a) Osiris was the model righteous man who functioned in the divine state as the judge of the departed. Hence the Isian initiate, reborn as the new Osiris, was supposed to exhibit the Osirian type of righteousness.

(2) So, too, in the other mystery systems, the initiate realistically united with his Lord, and actually transformed by the virtue of the union, had his ideal incorporated within himself as a part of his very being.

(a) In the end, mystical experience became the theoretical basis and practical incitement to good conduct.

(b) In this close articulation of mysticism and morality, the cults made an important and distinctive contribution to the ethical life of the age.

6. The mysteries were unusually well equipped to meet the need for assurances regarding the future.

a. The ultimate pledge that the mystery religions made pertained not to the present but to the future.

(1) It was the assurance of a happy immortality.

(a) Whatever attitude a man might adopt on the continued existence after death, he could not well avoid the issue.

b. The mystery cults from Greece and the Orient specialized in future guarantees.

(1) Originally intended to assure the miracle of reviving vegetation in the springtime, they were perfectly adapted to guarantee the miracle of the spirit's immortality after physical death.

(a) These were the cults which in the form of Dionysian and Orphian brotherhoods had first brought the promise of a happy future life to Greece in the religious revival of the 6th century BCE.

(b) In Hellenistic times the Greek cults merged with similar religions from the east which offered equivalent guarantees,

and in this syncretized form came into their own.

(2) In the early imperial period of Rome, they were more popular than ever, for they gave positive and definite answers to the questioning of the common man about the future.

(a) Their answer had the authority of revelation and it included the guarantee of divine aid in the realization of that blessed after-life which they vividly depicted to their devotees.

C. Summary

1. When consideration is given to the fundamental character of the interests represented by the mystery religions, one can well understand their popularity in the Greco-Roman world.

a. In an era of individualism, when men were no longer looking to religion for guarantee of a racial or national order, the mystery cults offered the boon of personal transformation through participating in rites of initiation.

b. At a time when men were seeking a larger life through contact with supernatural powers, the mysteries guaranteed absolute union with the divine beings who controlled the universe.

c. In an age when men were craving emotional uplift, mystery initiation gave them such encouragement as they could scarcely find elsewhere.

d. At a period where realism characterized thought in all departments of life, the religions of redemption offered men realistic rites to guarantee the actuality of spiritual processes.

e. The supernatural sanctions were sought to validate ethical ideals, the mystery cults provided a unique combination of mysticism and morality that was effective.

f. When, as never before, people were questioning about the future fate of the individual soul, the mysteries, through initiation, gave guarantee of a happy immortality.

2. At every one of these points the mystery religions of redemption were effectively meeting the needs of large numbers of people in Greco-Roman society.

END OF LESSON 3 PART A